

ESTABLISHED BY FRANKLIN 1768

WHOLE NUMBER 7,834

NEWPORT, R. I.



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CHAPTER XV.

MISS DORA THISTLE IS NOT INTERESTING.

Alec was not mistaken in supposing that he could not escape the vigilance of the young lady from New York. She came for Farmer Fairley's mail the very next day, and he saw her standing in the little knot of young people near the door waiting for the letters to be distributed. Her name was Dora Thistle. She did not belong to the best society, but her mother had invited her and her widowed mother, with whom she lived, to their house from time to time, and it was hoped that she would better herself before long by contracting a good marriage. And it had not been for her vain ambitions she would not have been a disagreeable companion. She meant well, was fairly intelligent and good looking, and unusually gentle and free. But Alec had no desire whatever to renew his acquaintance with her, and prayed fervently in his heart that she might not recognize him.

He was helping to distribute the letters and stood as far back behind the tier of pigeonholes as possible, not looking up, but working away busily. From time to time he gave a quick glance to see what Miss Thistle was doing.

The letters were all distributed, Mr. Higgins volunteered to Miss Thistle the Fairley's mail, and one by one the waiting group disappeared, but she did not go. She pretended to be looking at some callous. Alec continued behind the letter box, but it was getting treacherous. Every one but Miss Thistle had gone, and at last he felt obliged to come out. Mr. Higgins went in to his dinner, and only Alec was left in the store—alone with Miss Thistle.

As soon as she saw that they were alone she went directly toward the counter, behind which was Alec. He stood grimly back, both hands in his trousers pockets. She looked him sharply in the eye, came close up to the counter and leaned over it, so that it made a crease across the front of her summer skirt, rested her hands nearly at the opposite side of the counter and said in a clear whisper:

"Mr. Howe, you needn't pretend you don't know me. I recognized you at the first glance when you were in the cart yesterday. I heard you had left home. I am proud of you."

She smiled sweetly, and Alec was forced to smile in return and say some-



He was helping to distribute the letters. Miss Thistle. He scarcely knew what it was. Again she looked at him with her pleading eyes and said:

"I am proud of you."

He shuffled awkwardly like a countryman, so he felt.

"I think it noble of you to strike for yourself like this. You needn't feel ashamed."

She drew back a little and looked around the store.

"This must be a horrid place to stay in all the time. I am just proud of you," she said.

Alec thought it about time to turn the conversation and remarked that it was a pleasant day, though rather hot.

"I just adore the country," she said rapturously, "but I've been a little lonely till I saw you yesterday. I came only day before yesterday. Poor mamma couldn't come. I'm practically all alone, though Mrs. Bentley is supposed to be my chaperone. But I shan't be lonely now that I've found you. There is a lovely woodcock of Mr. Fairley's house, and I've already found a beautiful walk."

"But I am a laboring man now, you know, Miss Thistle," said Alec apologetically.

"But that doesn't matter in the least," responded the young lady, with condescending magnanimity.

"I can't leave the store, you see," Alec explained.

"Oh," she said softly, looking out of the door. "But you can come and see me Sundays. I am sure you don't work on Sundays. We can have all Sunday afternoon together, and I shall be here three weeks at least," she answered brightly and with such cooling good humor that Alec smiled and yielded. His only proviso was that she wouldn't tell Mrs. Bentley or let the people in New York know where he was, he said.

She smiled beamingly from under her graceful chip hat as she went out the door, and for the moment Alec was under her spell. She was sweet and clean and dainty, and he seemed to have a rustic's worship of those high qualities. She seemed somehow to be above him, and evidently she felt her power and meant to use it.

On Sunday afternoon Alec went. For the first time he was bitterly ashamed of his clothes. He noticed how short his trousers were, how ill fitting his coat was. He furnished himself with a new straw hat, with a red and blue band, which he found in the stock of the store, but the colors in the band spoiled his pleasure in wearing it. He had stipulated that she should meet him in the wood back of the Fairley's house, and there he went to wait for her. But she was there almost as promptly as he.

"Oh, you're here before me!" she cried on seeing him. "I stepped to catch a butterfly. See!" She displayed a pit-

able looking little yellow winged butterfly, which she tried to put and catch. "I think these woods are perfectly lovely," she went on as they walked along side by side. But Alec fancied she was careful to keep her skirts from contact with him. As follows followed, and presently she burst out:

"Mr. Howe, you don't mean to live here all your life, do you?"

"Why not?" asked Alec, with just a touch of malice.

"It is beautiful for a holiday," she answered distractedly, "but I should think it would be horrid to live here with those people all the year round. They're so awkward and dirty."

She looked vaguely away into a cool little dell, and presently sat down upon a mossy rock.

"Possibly they are, but I think I shall live here permanently if I succeed in earning my livelihood."

She looked at him reproachfully and said:

"Mr. Howe, they're spoiling you."

She looked at him again for a moment with her clear eyes and then inquired, "You haven't gone crazy, have you?"

She was so serious that Alec laughed out loud, but she did not even smile. He looked at her and thought of Maud and of Lisbeth, and thought how selfish a creature this girl was, how thoughtless of others, how inconsiderate in her remarks to him even.

"I think I ought to write to your father," she said after a puzzled pause.

"I beg of you, do nothing of the kind," he pleaded almost earnestly, and she promised to say nothing (ill she returned to New York.

They spent an hour idly rambling about, when she said she must return to the house, and Alec was only too glad to escape. He stalked moodily across the fields, thinking that the afternoon had been a failure. Once he had been this girl's superior; now she treated him as a subordinate. He was a rustic, a countryman.

After escaping from Miss Dora Thistle Alec returned to the house, instinctively climbed the attic stairs and settled comfortably into a large rocking chair on the balcony.

As the light of sunset died away his eyes rested on the glooming valley below, with its church steeples, white and polished. And he could deprecate the farmhouse with great rattling banisters, and here a little clump of village, and there a red brick schoolhouse, white in between were smooth, mown fields and stretches of grain and vegetables, and then low level meadows surrounded by thick pine groves, now almost wrapped in darkness. And here below was the great forest he had visited, stretching unbroken for miles straight away, that forest that was sister to the mountains.

Here were wealth, success, activity; yonder were the great rich hotels, and there the railroads with their spidery crawling trains. If one could but grasp this wealth, this activity, this mass of life, the world would be conquered.

Presently Lisbeth came and sat in a chair opposite him, but she did not speak to him, nor did he address her; indeed he scarcely looked at her. Yet he was glad she was there. She had an atmosphere of home affection about her that comforted him and made him feel that Ashton was really his home. He had already adopted her in his heart as his sister, and he could not perceive that she rebelled against the relationship, though she gave absolutely no sign of her own feelings.

CHAPTER XVI.

HE GOES TO THE MOUNTAINS FOR THE CATTLE.

Miss Dora Thistle did not call at the store the next day, and the day after a bright young man from the city arrived and quite absorbed her attention for the rest of the time she spent at Ashton. Alec was evidently a great puzzle to her, and she felt that it was best to let him alone. Besides, he had grown very stupid, and Mr. Molton, with his white flannel suit, brown shoes and very broad brimmed hat with a red band, was always interesting. Mr. Molton did not know Alec, and once or twice was rather rude to him, until Miss Thistle whispered in his ear; then he only stared hard at Alec and shook his head.

But before the summer was past the young man of the village made his advances to Alec, and he got on to very friendly terms with those he met every Sunday in his Sabbath school class.

One day Alec decided to confide his personal doubts and difficulties to George Marston, the blacksmith. He was quiet looking about to see if he could find any remunerative employment or occupation, and thought that George might suggest some idea. Mr. Higgins still gave him only his board and lodging, though he had freely allowed Alec to take things from the store on credit.

"Ask him for \$5 a week," said George when Alec mentioned this. "You deserve it, and he will never give it to you unless you ask him."

Alec asked Mr. Higgins for the addition of \$5 a week, and the request was promptly acceded.

"I thought you was a queer chap to work all summer on nothing a week," said Joe, "but if you wanted to do it I wasn't saying nothing."

The sharp October frosts had turned all the maple leaves scarlet and all the elm and chestnut leaves yellow, and the ivy leaves yellow and scarlet together. It was time to bring home the young cattle from the mountains, and George Marston and Alec were deputed to go for them for the neighborhood. George Marston was considered the best hand at coaxing cattle in the village, and he in turn asked Alec to go with him. Joe Higgins readily let the young man off, for he had cattle of his own to be brought. They were to take George Marston's Concord wagon and hay mow, a first rate roadster. In the wagon were plenty of blankets, so that they might sleep a night on the bottom of it if need be, and oats for the mare and a big lamb basket that Lisbeth prepared. It contained, Alec knew, a lot of her good things—ginger cookies and currant jelly and huckleberry jam, besides more solid nutriment, and there was a big jug of sweet cider.

They would be gone no doubt for three days, if not four or five, for it was 30 miles to the mountains and hunting cattle and driving them home are very slow work. They would start early on Monday morning and reach the pasturage by evening. The next day would come the heat for the straw ones, and there was

no telling how long that would take. Then it would require no less than two days to drive the cattle home, even if they traveled more or less steadily during the intervening night.

Alec liked the idea of taking such a trip with George Marston, for a fondness had grown up between the man and the lad which was clearly recognized by both, though never spoken of. Perhaps Lisbeth was the mutual bond, for she had become like a very sister to Alec, and he had done all he could to forward the suit of Marston, to whom also he looked for a sort of protecting, brotherly interest which is consoling to think of, even if it does not mean very much practically.

Lisbeth took great pains in getting the two off comfortably. Many a little thing was added for their welfare which they would never have thought of. At 5 o'clock in the morning the old, dirty, rattling wagon, with its rough floor, that had wide cracks in it, stood before the veranda of the store, and on this special occasion the store door was standing open. But though rather ill looking, the wagon had good springs and good wheels, and the hay mow was fresh and sleek in her substantial though scarcely elegant harness. Everything had been put into the wagon the night before except the lunch basket, and Lisbeth had been up for an hour past preparing that. Alec now appeared at the door bringing it, and George and Lisbeth were close behind him. He put the basket in behind, and George got on to the seat and took up the reins. When all was ready, Alec jumped up on the low veranda, and taking Lisbeth's hand, said a hearty goodbye and kissed her on the cheek. He blushed slightly, but affected an unconsciousness of manner and unconsciously as he swung round the wagon and proceeded to climb on the opposite side. Lisbeth looked after him in blank amazement. She was neither offended nor pleased, apparently, but simply astonished, and it took her some seconds to grasp the situation. Then she smiled and blushed prettily, and with a knowing look stepped down beside the wagon as if she thought herself very stupid to need such a hint from Alec, and shyly lifted up her lips to George, who bent and kissed her shyly, and Lisbeth slipped her hand up into his for a moment. Then they were gone. It was still early, the very gray twilight of the morning, the air was cool and bracing, and the marbled trotted briskly away. But after awhile they fell to talking about various topics of philosophy and life. Love always suggests the philosophy of life, for is not love the great mystery? But neither of them was sentimental, and soon other things distracted them.

There was among farmers great activity just at home just at this season. They were doing up the fall work. Now and then the travelers got wide views over the fields and forests, which seemed clothed in gorgeous, royal robes of flaming red and yellow mingled with the dark green of the pines and hemlocks. Indeed, it was a glorious sight, so strange and different from the soft greens of the spring. Moreover, the air was cool and dry; only white fleecy clouds floated in the sky, and the following leaves came rustling briskly down. Most of the apples had been picked, but open barn doors showed long lines of unheeded barrels with the red fruit, and here and there in the fields were huge haystacks, suggesting the harvest of the year. Besides, all the men seemed to work with a relaxing yet buoyant energy, as if thankful that the heavy work of the year was over. Why is it that we love the autumn when the winter will come so soon, with its dull, cloudy November days and its December snows and its January ice? And why is the spring so sad, even when it is the glad herald of a new year and new life? Perhaps it is that we who are ripening rejoice in the ripeness and mellow beauty of autumn, while the spring saddens us because it suggests a new life and budding hopes to others, but not to us. At any rate autumn is filled with joy, is very joy itself in fallness, and when it puts on such regal robes as it does in New England, when the leaves of all the trees and shrubs and vines turn to such brilliant hues, it becomes indeed triumphant.

When at night they reached the pasturage they found half a dozen steers and heifers that George greeted familiarly and which came to eat the salt in his hand. He was disappointed to find so few. But these were secured, and then they prepared themselves for the

They prepared their lunch together. night. A campfire was built, over which George made tea and cooked some eggs. The treasures of Lisbeth's basket were fully explored, the mare was unharnessed and tied out to grass, for there was a little dried grass outside the pasture bars, though very little indeed. Then the boys got their blankets and sat about the fire talking eagerly as the twilight deepened and the stars came out. Both seemed happy, but Alec was almost ecstatic. When, a little later, they made their rude beds on the wagon bottom, he lay awake a long time looking up into the clear, still sky. Never before had he slept under the open stars, and now with regret he wished fortune had not always provided him with a bed in those first struggling days.

The next day they were scouring the woods, each searching in a different direction for the missing cattle. It was one of those warm October days when the sunshine seems yellow of all the year. A few rustling dead leaves fluttered underfoot, and dry branches broke, while partridges started up on every side, winging low along the ground or running with lowered heads.

Here and there one might catch glimpses up the gorges of the mountains, revealing a splendor and a gorgeousness that must remain in memory (ill death of even the most unimaginative. It seemed as if Dame Nature was a fine lady inspecting the most sumptuous materials for her wardrobe's dresses, and here they were spread out before her in magnificent abundance, as if this were the warehouse of the gods. Fold on fold they lay high up the mountain sides and down the gorges, now red, now yellow, green or brown.

Suddenly Alec came out on a little lake, held in a lefty niche between great ledges. The dry leaves fluttered on its edges, rippling from falling twigs or insects or an obstreperous frog ran playfully and lightly over its smooth surface, and it looked so cool and calm and clear! And there yonder, standing in the edge of the water, were five of the cattle. The sight of them called Alec to his senses, and immediately he was racing after them as well as he could for the unevenness of the ground and the tripping branches underfoot. He had not much difficulty in driving them toward the bars, for they seemed judgment of themselves to go in that direction. But it was near a mile and a half, so the sun stood at full noon, when Alec and George met once more, and having rounded in the cattle they had found they prepared their lunch together. Only three of the herd were lacking, and these they hoped to find in a part of the pasture yet unvisited.

But George seemed very sober indeed, and scarcely spoke. Alec missed his free, frank, cordial tone, and was vaguely distressed, though he could make out no reason.

As soon as luncheon was finished they started out again. Alec wandered all the afternoon, finding nothing of the cattle, but plenty else to enjoy. But as the sun sank out of sight away across the valley behind the Green mountains, he heard a long shrill whistle from George, and hurried toward it as rapidly as he could. It was half an hour before he reached the bars, but here he found George and the missing cattle. So at daylight the next morning they would be ready to start for home.

George was taciturn as ever. Alec was oppressed, but rallied him on being in love, telling him that after that parting kiss he ought to be a happy man. The other's face lightened somewhat at this, but still he did not resume his natural cheerfulness. They ate supper quietly, and as both were tired they soon lay down in their blankets to sleep. But neither slept. It was clear and cool; the stars shone down steadily; the wind rustled lightly but mournfully in the trees; over in the east the moon was just coming up round and red, casting long shadows among the trees. They lay thus for a long time with no other sound. Alec would have gone to sleep long ago had he not been so very tired. Suddenly George asked, as if he were inquiring what o'clock it were, but half expecting to find his bedfellow asleep: "Did you ever kiss her before?"

"No," said Alec in the same tone. "I don't know how I happened to then, only she looked so lovely."

"Do you think she cares for me?" came the question after a little pause.

"Why, of course. I am sure of it. Didn't you know it? I know it from the first night I staid there. You know that Saturday evening you came. I saw her cry a little behind the door when you were gone."

There was a very long silence after this. Neither moved nor offered to speak. But at last George said in his old cheery tone:

"You'd better go to sleep, Alec. It's tough tramping over the mountains for the first time. I'm pretty stiff myself, and we must booff early tomorrow. It's a good thing we've got all the cattle in."

The journey home was a long and tedious one. One of the men had to walk all the way, and they took turns. At the end of the first day they were so fatigued that George decided to secure a pen if possible in which to keep the cattle for the night, and at last succeeded. The next day one of the steers ran away, and while ten miles from home they were obliged to drive the other cattle into a neighbor's barnyard and go to hunt for the missing one, which they found along near midnight and drove back to the others. They reached Ashton about 10 o'clock in the evening of the third day. The store was still lighted, and George seemed in exceedingly cheerful spirits as they drew near. They drove the cattle into the great barnyard at the rear, and then George brought the horse around to the front of the store, while Alec entered the building at the rear. As everything in the kitchen was still dark, he made his way into the dining room, where supper was spread for himself and George, though no one was there, and then he went on into the store, where Lisbeth must be. No doubt the children had gone to bed, and possibly Mrs. Higgins also.

To his surprise, he found the store full of strangers. Alec read in their faces that something had happened, and he hurried on toward the outer door, where he could see Lisbeth and Mrs. Higgins looking into the dark for himself and George. As he reached the door he made a sound, and Mrs. Higgins turned suddenly and fell on his neck sobbing as she murmured out:

"Oh, Mr. Howe, I knew you would come! I knew you would come! You've always been back to me and to Lisbeth, and even Joe spoke well of you. I knew you would come!"

"What is the matter?" asked Alec, looking at Lisbeth, and involuntarily drawing away somewhat from Mrs. Higgins' embrace.

Lisbeth turned a sad, pale face on him, and said shortly:

"Father's had a fit and died about two hours ago. We've been waiting for you to come. Where is George?"

"There," answered Alec, for George had come up in the dark and was standing on the step. Lisbeth turned and stood facing him.

"Father's dead," she said in the same monotonous tone in which she had addressed Alec. "He died in one of those fits about two hours ago. We've been waiting for you. The neighbors came in and offered to help, but they could do nothing."

Others had crowded around, much to Alec's annoyance, but Lisbeth and Mrs. Higgins and George seemed to think it only natural that they should. But Lisbeth said in the same tone as before: "Come in and have your supper. I've had it waiting for you. Come in, George. Don't talk about going off now. Come in. Supper's all ready."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF JOE HIGGINS.

As the doctor and a neighbor had performed the necessary offices for the dead, there was nothing to do now but eat supper and go to bed. Kind women followed Mrs. Higgins and Lisbeth fairly into the dining room, and had to be assured many times that there was nothing to be done, no assistance needed, that they were perfectly comfortable for the night now that George and Alec had come home. And at last, as George and Alec were finishing their supper, the four were left alone in the dining room, and Mrs. Higgins and Lisbeth sank into chairs at the table with the young men. Mrs. Higgins by turns wept on the virtues of her deceased husband. All three tried to comfort her, but in vain. She became hysterical, till Lisbeth spoke to her:

"Mother, stop! Stop, mother!"

But Alec had been watching the face of Lisbeth. Not a tear had escaped her eyes; her face was pallid and drawn in tones lines.

Alec suggested to Mrs. Higgins that he should help her into the parlor, and she would gratefully have accepted his assistance, but Lisbeth jumped up and said:

"I'll go with mother."

"No, you stay with George," said Mrs. Higgins, even at this moment thoughtful of the proprieties to her guest.

"George can take care of himself, Alec can look after him," said Lisbeth curtly, and took her mother's arm.

The two men sat looking at each other for a little while. Then Alec said: "I think I'll clear off the table. Lisbeth must be pretty well used up tonight."

As he began his work George rose and said he thought he must be going; that he would come over in the morning, and he glad to do anything in the world he could do.

"No, stay a little while. Lisbeth will be back," said Alec, and went on with his work. So George sat down in a corner of the room and waited.

In ten minutes our dainty city had had performed the duties of the table girl. Then he went to close up the store. He bolted the front door and put out the lights. Then he went the round of the windows in the tavern, fastening them as Mr. Higgins had been accustomed to do. As he went toward the dining room he heard voices and knew Lisbeth must be there. George was standing in front of her, a hand on each of her shoulders.

"I don't know but this is a bad time to say it," George was saying, "yet I don't know but it's the right time. I meant to say it when I got back. I was thinking about it all the way along. Now that he's gone you'll need somebody to take care of you and the folks, and I don't know that I'm good for anything else if you'll just have me, Lisbeth."

He spoke in a hesitating, jerky way. But Lisbeth understood.

"But," said she, "I won't tie myself to any man with all my father's family hanging on my skirts. If mother and the children get enough out of the store and things to take care of them properly, perhaps I might."

Then Alec heard something that sounded like a kiss. A moment later (Continued on page three)

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